Springfield Presbyterian Church

Third Week of Advent 2020

The 285th Day of March

**Sow Joy**

1. What is Joy?

This week, as we prepared to celebrate this Sunday of Joy, my Facebook feed of Pastors overwhelming had different statuses asking the same root question: “What is joy?” In weeks before, I didn’t see any pastors in my friend group ask - what is hope? What is peace? So, I found it curious that this question comes up.

 But maybe that’s just the point entirely, we’ve got a bit of a handle on hope and what the future looks like for us, even when hope is hard to find. We have a sense of what peace could look like, the new kingdom coming and breathing and living here in this place. In some ways I come to this week and I feel almost inappropriate by asking you to live in joy when we are facing such dire straits as a world in pandemic. So I thought it would help both you and me to look at some of the responses that I saw come in this week.

 Some thought joy was a feeling that grounded you, that was very deep in the soul, as opposed to happiness which was fleeting. Some people thought the exact opposite – that joy was fleeting. Some said that happiness was something you chose, but joy was something pure, something sacred. In looking at Christmas, someone said that happiness is getting a gift, but joy is the giving of gifts. Perhaps though, my favorite answer was this one: “Joy is my 2 year old daughter’s middle name and it is what I feel when she is sleeping.”

 Then I started to hunt around my own heart and ask what comes to mind when I think of joy. The image I have in my head is this deep down barreling laughter, the one that makes you cry because you cannot contain what you feel and your ribs hurt and you almost are gasping for breath – for me, that kind of joy, that’s more than happiness, that’s a whole body experience feeling joy. Another more esteemed theologian, Henri Nouwen tried to separate joy and happiness in a way that I think can comfort us today. He said, “Joy is the experiencing of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away.” And so, joy can be present even in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of sadness.

 Now, I usually give you your homework at the end of a sermon, but I think I’d rather give it early on, just to get you thinking. All of these definitions of joy are good, they are appropriate and make sense, yet we find that there are so many ways of defining joy. So that’s exactly what I want you to do this week. I want you to open up a piece of paper in a notebook and under the heading, ‘what is joy’ or ‘what brings me joy’ just start writing. Do not question whether it is joyful enough or try to rank them – just write, write what you feel, what comes into your head, because we are celebrating Joy this week, and while I could define it for you, it’s going to mean more to you this week if you define it for yourself.

1. Historically Grateful

So, we will celebrate joy, in the many ways we define it, and we give joy for

Christ’s birth to come. This Sunday, we are called to set aside our troubles, our misfortunes, even to some extent our repentance, and to fully live in the knowledge and joy that Christ is on the way.

 In our passage from the prophet Isaiah, we hear many ideas that point to joy. We are called to sow joy, to plant it, so the things that the prophet articulates becomes true, so that when Christ comes, we are ready to reap the joy of that work and that world. Isaiah exclaims that God wants to bind up the brokenhearted, release the captives, comfort the mourning. When that day comes, the joy will be so bright and so robust that the oaks of righteousness will tear up into the raw ground from roots of a God of joy and soar upwards, repairing all the land that was ruined along the way.

I feel like the prophet gives us a manual, right here – these are the things that God wants for us, so sow joy, desire peace, live in hope and Christ who is love personified will come and change this desolate place into one of inconceivable beauty.

1. Walking Blindly

Whenever we look at our advent candles, whenever we consider hope, peace,

and now joy and light these candles, we are not neglecting the realities of the world. We are saying that hope abides even in the midst of real trauma. We acknowledge in Christ that peace can be a reality for those who do the hard work of reconciling. And today, we do not deny the world and its sadness, but we also can live into joy as a gift from God, for the people of God.

 We are not blind to the world, and neither was Isaiah, nor was Mary when she rejoiced. Often, the Bible is thought of with stories of harsh condemnation and judgment from God and Job’s life story is one complicated story with much sadness, and when we look at the New Testament, we see that while Christ has come, the world is still not made perfect, that human beings are flawed, that the early church has an ego problem and struggles of its own.

 I’m grateful that these are not the only stories that we know in Scripture, because we would do well to see the joy that Abraham and Sarah must have felt when they kissed their newborn son when they were in the 90s. We would be wise to recall the prophet’s answering their calls to witness, to speak truth in challenging circumstances. We would be missing the mark if we forgot that moment where Saul became Paul and literally his eyes were opened.

 Just as you can have joy in a time of sadness, you can have sadness in a time of joy. We see that in our Scripture, we see that in the writings of our ancestors, and we are right here living it, today, making sense out of a sometimes senseless world.

1. Sow Joy

So, how will you sow joy. How will you take what Isaiah has prophesied from our God and actually put that into action. How will sow places of freedom and encouragement in this world. Where will you plant the seeds of justice and liberty in the places you stride. How will you take a small seed of joy and plant it, so that others may reap that joy alongside you, and through it, see a more Christ like world.

And don’t forget that important homework, because if we want to sow joy, we better find out what joy is first. Actually, you have an extra credit holy points assignment and it’s this – take your list of what joy means and see what one or two things on that list pops up for you as important and integral, something that makes your heart beat a little bit faster. Take that one thing and find a practical way to sow that joy, whatever is, however you want to, into your world and the world of all whom you love.

Your assignments are prepared, the school bell will let out soon, so may you and I take what we learn in this Word, in these songs, in this sacred space together and live it out as a people sowing and seeking joy in these days. Amen.